

ANALYSIS

The Forest of the South (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"Gordon is 'at her best in recapturing that phase of life in the South...where fishing and gunning seem infinitely preferable to the serious business of life.' The best stories in this collection are 'vignettes of that phase'--that is, the Aleck Maury stories, which 'ring a bell of authentic characterization'."

Anonymous

Review of *The Forest of the South*

Kirkus 13:375 (1945)

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan

Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon: A Reference Guide

Robert E. Golden and Mary C. Sullivan (G. K. Hall 1977) 226

"Few writers have so admirable a talent for creating by suggestion.' Gordon makes you 'sense a great deal more than she tells'."

Anonymous

Review of *The Forest of the South*

New Yorker (22 September 1945) 78

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 226

"Gordon's South is 'a timeless one, marked as it is throughout by a peculiar mode of speech and a fixed set of values [courage, fidelity, and love of nature], the virtues she unobtrusively admires.' Into this collection have gone a 'delicate ear for the rhythms of Southern speech, subtle accretion of detail, rich inventiveness of incident, and rigid subjection of the material to the point of view.' The best of these stories are those in which values express themselves in action, such as 'The Captive' and 'Her Quaint Honour'; in 'The Last Day in the Field' this method is united to natural symbolism."

Anonymous

Review of *The Forest of the South*

U.S. Quarterly Book List 1 (December 1945) 10

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 226

"All the stories are 'rich in detail, in verisimilitude, in colloquial idiom, and as charming as one could find in a day's browsing'."

Olive Carruthers

Review of *The Forest of the South*

The Chicago Sun Book Week (23 September 1945) 17

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 226

"There is a 'flowing vividness about grand folk and plain ones in these stories' that 'lifts them into high quality by contrast with most American short stories now being written'.... 'The Captive' is the most effective. Gordon's strength is in the creation of attractive characters... 'The Forest of the South' is the 'most enjoyable'... It is almost perfect as an expression of 'the dark beauty of the mood of grandeur and grace which disappeared long ago in the American South,' or perhaps never existed. Gordon 'has coupled a sort of man majesty with such meticulous realism' that her world seems 'more tragically true than any past could have been'.... Gordon is 'particularly skillful' in characterizing women and boys."

Jonathan Daniels

"Tales of the South"

Saturday Review (27 October 1945) 40

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 226-27

"A very fine book of short stories. There is ease in the telling, restraint in the planning, and care in the phrasing. Never is the intention of the story compromised for the sake of popular appeal or cheap effect.' Each story has 'a richness of conception and a measuredness of meaning which makes the book solid, varied, delightful, and original.' In 'The Ice House' there is 'none of the superficial scorn for the carpetbagger which would have made the story simply another example of the southerner's resentment at the exploiting post-war Yankee.' Jinny in 'The Captive' seems 'to have the quality of a gray and ghostly figure in a savage and timeless world, rather than the personality of a plain woman.' Aleck Maury is as fine and as forceful in the stories about him as he was in the novel. 'Old Red' is especially 'handsome' writing."

Paul Engle

Review of *The Forest of the South*

Chicago Sunday Tribune (23 September 1945) 9

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 227

"Preserving certain values indispensable to life and art,' the collection 'shows how nearly these have disappeared from the urban jungles of the North': namely, a dramatic sense, a sense of character, a sense of history, a tragic sense--all associated 'with agrarian life, large families, ancestral piety.' Cities cannot develop these 'sensuous qualities' which enable Gordon to 'treat certain themes long ridiculed in melodrama.' The best of the stories 'are perhaps the least formal...concerning the piety and erudition of the sportsman'.... 'All Lovers Love the Spring' is a 'miraculous six-page story' of 'the felt quality of spinsterhood' and of the tragic limitations of 'life on earth, bound in time and defined in death.' All this is projected through the 'absolute rightness, in context' of the understatement to the camphor reference and through 'one vision of pear branches rising up like wands, their petals like festoons of little sea shells still unfolded'."

Marjorie Farber

"Recent Fiction"

New Republic (22 October 1945) 543-44

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 227-28

"Although *The Forest of the South* is her first volume of short stories, Gordon 'has long been recognized as a skilled craftsman of the shorter form of fiction.' All that Gordon 'does supremely well stems from a single gift: a Thoreau-like passion for the sweet world of her native South.' She never points, never exclaims. The best in this collection are 'her three superb stories' about Aleck Maury, just as *Aleck Maury*, *Sportsman* is 'the finest novel of sports and fishermen in American literature'.... The stories in this collection [are] 'distinguished'."

Sister Mariella

Review of *The Forest of the South*

Commonweal (26 October 1945) 50-51

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 229

"Miss Gordon can create character'.... 'The action of all these stories is carefully motivated'.... The author also handles 'special and exclusively masculine interests' with 'absolute first-hand knowledge and as a man would handle them.' The woman remembering her girlhood in 'All Lovers Love the Spring' may well be Caroline Gordon and her aside may be a key to why some stories are 'well written and moving'."

William Maxwell

"Of Southerners and the South"

New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review (23 September 1945) 4

summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 229

"A 'carefully arranged exhibit of work by a serious artist in prose,' and a collection having 'almost ponderable intergrity' leaving 'no gaps.' Gordon's writing is 'beautifully American' and each story gives a facet of the 'near' South. 'The Captive' is a 'notable' story that deserves 'wide recognition' as a 'swift narrative rendering of heroic human experience.' The grim reality is such a story is 'emphasized by the paradoxical expression of violence in matter-of-fact understatement.' 'The Captive,' the Civil War stories, and a few others in the book, particularly 'Tom Rivers,' represent 'the highest accomplishment of that

specialized fiction called 'historical.' Conviction runs through everything in the book; all necessary details of background seem fully known and are, therefore, treated casually. 'The Last Day in the Field' is 'sound and excellent'... In all the stories there is a 'wonderfully indirect handling of frustration.' There are 'no standardized short story patterns in this book'."

Richard Sullivan
"Out of the 'Near South'"
New York Times Book Review (7 October 1945) 6, 26
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 230

"The stories have a 'curious psychological depth' and the 'invisible canvas of the past' serves as a backdrop 'against which the theme is played.' Gordon's perspective is 'more than merely nostalgia for lost grandeur'; rather, she fuses the surface, structure, and sensibility of the past in such a way that the past itself acts as 'protagonist or agent...always accruing upon itself.'

'The Captive' illustrates 'the growth of her resourcefulness in dealing with the past'; its particular brilliance is the 'subtle blending of the natural and the supernatural.' 'Old Red,' in which the 'plot is Time,' is representative of 'the more mature habits of Miss Gordon's art.' 'The Forest of the South' illustrates the 'heightened connection between interior and exterior event, between environment and character which can only be vaguely suggested by the term symbolism.' 'Her Quaint Honour' is a powerful example of Gordon's 'extraordinarily keen insight in the caste structure of the South.' No prose writer except Faulkner 'has remained so purely identified' with the forest of the South for 'almost two decades'."

Vivienne Koch
"The Forest of the South"
Sewanee Review 54:543-47 (1945)
summarized by Mary C. Sullivan, *Reference Guide* 231

"She ranks among the foremost writers of her time, and her art will endure.... The reader finds her first volume of stories *The Forest of the South* (1945) not only the Aleck Maury stories, based on the life of Miss Gordon's father, but also takes of the Civil War and Reconstruction. which undoubtedly originated in anecdotes that came to her by way of family reminiscences. Indeed, every narrative in *The Forest of the South* and in *Old Red and Other Stories* (1963) has the unmistakable ingredients of life itself, those sharp and singular details which one immediately recognizes as containing truths beyond the province of the mere 'angelic imagination.'

Thus Miss Gordon's fiction moves *toward* abstraction rather than proceeds from it, and is always symbolic rather than purely literal or purely allegorical. For this reason she never falsifies the world as, for example, Shirley Jackson does in order to serve the tyranny of intellect. Heart and head in Miss Gordon's work never come to blows; and neither betrays the steady, uncompromising senses, which are the primary means of fictional understanding. In other words, her artistic vision is whole and inviolable, which can be said of few modern writers....

Few Southerners have matched the achievement of Caroline Gordon, Katherine Anne Porter, and William Faulkner...[her] technical sophistication... The evidence of Miss Gordon's concern for her craft is revealed not only by its embodiment in her novels and in her short stories but also by theory and explication in two of the most important books in the canon of twentieth-century criticism, *The House of Fiction* (1950) and *How to Read a Novel* (1964). The first of these, written with Allen Tate, is one of the best textbooks ever published on the subject, and serves to instruct writers as well as the reader....

In *The Forest of the South*, produced at a critical moment in Western history, she writes with an astonishing purity...as if she had no inkling of the great philosophical catastrophe [Civil War] which had already rendered meaningless for many of her own generation in the definition of man to be found in Plato's *Timaeus* and in the germinal works of Christendom. But the fact that these stories still work today, still remain vital and true when the old orthodoxy has been so long under attack, is ample evidence that in those earlier years she knew precisely what she was about, that in her craft and wisdom she was not merely writing for a dying past but for a far-reaching future as well."

Thomas H. Landess, ed.

"The characters of Miss Gordon's short stories are constantly being tested to prove whether they have resources to achieve a virtuous love, and, more often than not, they fail. Yet even their failures enjoy a certain dignity in that they have failed in a worthy and, from Miss Gordon's perspective, very hazardous enterprise. Their failure has been of a human rather than of a merely glandular order, since in Miss Gordon's fiction the excesses of a neural reductionism are avoided as scrupulously as those attaching to sentimental romanticism. Her stories are dispassionate in their portrayal of the motions of love, but at the same time they exhibit their kinship to the humanist tradition of Flaubert, James, and Faulkner, as opposed to the studiously Naturalistic manner of some of Miss Gordon's contemporaries.

The Forest of the South is an appropriate title for Miss Gordon's first collection of short stories and might indeed be justifiably extended to designate the subject of most of her early work. One critic has associated the 'Forest' of the title with the Southern past. Although that observation is probably valid, the image seems to me to have a further and perhaps more fundamental significance. Forests or woods occupy a large section of Miss Gordon's fictional topography. Aleck Maury repairs to the wilderness to protect his sensibility and to reenact the rituals of the sportsman-contemplative.

The woods are generally the trysting places of lovers in the stories, as well as a sort of natural temple where individuals retreat from time to time to establish a proper bond with nature. Miss Gordon's stories are usually given a rural setting, and even when action takes place on cleared land there is often a 'sugar-tree' somewhere in the area. The uncultivated natural world is constantly invoked to suggest the locus of the most fundamental human impulses connected with blood and sexual role. It is perhaps inevitable that Miss Gordon should write about the South since that region could still be considered a repository for the residue of authoritative blood sanctions that has managed to survive for modern deracinated man. Just as the forest is more primal than the garden and more natural in the sense of being more elemental, so Miss Gordon is involved with the South in its most elemental aspect as the custodian of deep natural pieties.

Her characters may frequently be drawn from the Southern 'gentry,' but they are involved in situations where instinct and the basic feelings of nature take precedence as guides to conduct over the more aristocratic and formal codes of courtesy and manners. The South as garden--a civilized and self-conscious society with its emphasis on social ritual and the public face of conduct--bears only peripherally on Miss Gordon's stories of love. Its presence may be dimly sensed as a somewhat distant enveloping reference, but the immediate foreground of these stories is occupied by actions which suggest the simple and powerful issues of the traditional sage and ballad rather than the delicate, courtly preoccupations of plantation fiction."

John E. Alvis
"The Idea of Nature and the Sexual Role in Caroline Gordon's Early Stories of Love"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 87-88

"*The Forest of the South* (1945) contains seventeen stories published over a period of sixteen years. The second [collection] *Old Red and Other Stories* (1963), contains thirteen pieces, nine of which appeared in the earlier collection. Altogether, Miss Gordon has published during her career in book form twenty-one stories... 'I am not a short story writer,' Caroline Gordon has asserted; 'I am a novelist'.... And yet, curiously, she is better known as a short-story writer than as a novelist. Two of her best-known stories are 'The Captive' and 'Old Red'; three other short stories also appear frequently in anthologies of modern fiction: 'The Last Day in the Field,' 'Her Quaint Honor,' and 'Brilliant Leaves.' These five, along with other stories not as well known to the general reader, have given Caroline Gordon a reputation, at least among critics, as one of our best short-story writers."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 112

"The intertwined roles of women and the South...became the main themes of her first collection of short stories, *The Forest of the South* (1945). The volume includes seventeen stories, all of her published tales with the exception of two that were excerpts from *None Shall Look Back* and *The Garden of Adonis*. One chapter from *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* that appeared as a short story, 'The Burning Eyes,' is also included in the collection. Excluding the excerpts from her novels, Caroline Gordon published sixteen short stories over a period of sixteen years. She did not rest on this achievement, but arranged her disparate works into a book that tells a story of its own.

The order is approximately chronological. The first story, 'The Captive,' is set on the Kentucky frontier in 1787. Three Civil War stories follow. In the next five stories Gordon takes Aleck Maury from his Reconstruction childhood to advanced old age in the 1930s, a break in the volume's chronology that promotes characterization. 'Tom Rivers' is framed in time-present, the 1930s, but the body of the story is a reminiscence of turn-of-the-century Texas. 'The Long Day' and the autobiographical 'Summer Dust' appear to be set in Caroline's childhood in the early 1900s. 'Mr. Powers' and 'Her Quaint Honour' concern problems with tenant farmers in the 1930s in the Clarksville setting of her Benfoly years. The years prior to the Second World War also appear to be the locale for the last three stories, 'The Enemies,' 'The Brilliant Leaves,' and 'All Lovers Love the Spring.' Gordon's intention is clear. As in her first six novels, she is attempting to portray and explain the decline of the South.

The arrangement of the stories also highlights Caroline's obsession with chronic misunderstandings and inadequacies between men and women. Andrew Lytle attributes this friction to historic causes: 'the conquest of the south is the destruction of a society formal enough and Christian enough to allow for the right relationships between the sexes.' The similarities in the romantic problems throughout the collection, however, argue against Lytle's conclusion. The volume begins and ends with a first-person account of a woman alone in the forest of the South. Despite the fact that the women in 'The Captive' and 'All Lovers Love the Spring' are separated by 150 years, they share the same plight, the withdrawal of masculine support that forces them to a lonely independence in the precarious world made by men. Jinny Wiley, the pioneer, is kidnapped by Indians while she is alone with her children on her farm while her husband is off doing business, and Miss Fuqua, the spinster, is captured by her invalid mother after Roger Tredwell fails to claim her.

Although the stature of the protagonists diminishes with the South from the tragic to the pathetic, Caroline's profound pessimism about the relations between the sexes remains constant. In this context, the forest of the South becomes more than a geographical setting; it is Caroline's dark metaphor for the human condition. Like the couples in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Caroline's lovers are separated and lost in the forest but for them there are no happy reconciliations. Caroline, in some ways, seems to be writing the script for her own loss of the garden of the South. Over the next two years, from the spring of 1944 to the spring of 1946, she would lose Allen, and with that loss of masculine support the garden of the South would be transformed into the menacing forest of the South for her. She would never live there again."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 171-73

"Caroline called her collection *The Forest of the South*. The title works on several levels. The book began with 'The Captive,' the story of Jinny Wiley's agony in the forest; it ended with Miss Fuqua in another forest, hunting mushrooms in 'All Lovers Love the Spring.' Yet more than background and setting throughout the tales, the forest served as a measure and reflection of society in Caroline's fictional world. It was at once the source of inspiration and madness, a refuge and a place of terror."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 243